

Doing more with less: Benelux keeps on truckin'

CHIEVRES, Belgium -- For IMA garrisons in Europe, the bad news is that money's tight. The good news is that IMA-EURO workers know how to squeeze the most out of every dollar (or Euro) to provide the best quality of life support for their Soldiers, civilians and their families.

At USAG Benelux, innovation doesn't create more money, but it does add mileage to what is has. Public Works and Logistics is investing in a vehicle reconditioning program that should provide a windfall over the next decade. The focal point of this program is Patrick Rocher, an automotive expert and body mechanic who has worked at the garrison for more than 24 years.

Rocher aims to stretch his department's resources by extending the life expectancy of an aging fleet of maintenance trucks not scheduled to be replaced anytime soon. Like everything else, it boils down to money, said Chuck Mielnicki, a garrison logistics maintenance officer. With 34 years of federal service, Mielnicki has weathered his share of budget cuts.

Rocher and Mielnicki point to this summer's announcement by DoD that the cost of replacing, repairing and upgrading Army equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan is expected to triple next year. How much less could it be anywhere else?

"That's why we are investing in a recondition program," Mielnicki said. His partner Rocher is reburberishing a total of 11 special purpose vehicles, flat beds and dump trucks.

The normal life expectancy for the equipment, some of which is used to haul and salt roads in the winter and perform other mechanical chores is 15 to 20 years. Rocher's work adds at least 10 more years of life to every truck. The savings - over time - are enormous. Garrison cost-cutting estimates range from \$300,000 to \$400,000.

When garrison newspaper editor J.D. Hardesty talked to Rocher for an article in the Meteor-Herault, the mechanic was putting the finishing touches on a refurbished orange and black 1987 Mercedes Unimog 100 with an original price tag of \$48,000. The same vehicle now lists for more than \$75,000. To replace the 11 aging maintenance trucks that are nearing their life expectancy would cost the garrison \$825,000.

With \$30,000 seed money for parts and paint, Rocher tears down and rebuilds the trucks from the ground up. Mielnicki refers to Rocher as the Maintenance Division's "auto mechanic extraordinaire." It's estimated his work has saved enough garrison dollars to pay his salary for the next 10 years.

Rocher uses about 350 man-hours per vehicle to go through the engine, transmission and diagnostics, even fabricating some parts when they're not available. It's become a labor of love. Rocher strips the entire truck into pieces spread across the shop floor and keeps "before and after" photo albums of his projects.

Some parts have to be sent out to be sandblasted; others are cleaned, scrubbed or fabricated by the mechanic. Rocher said he fabricated the entire truck bed, fenders, bumper, grill, fender wells and replaced the flooring in the 1987 Unimog on which he was wrenching, riveting and applying the finishing touches.

"I had to go through clean, refurbish or fabricate the electric, air and hydraulic systems," he said. He reassembled the newly painted truck bolt by bolt, rivet by rivet from the wheels up.

"I'm lucky to be working for the DOL Maintenance Division," Rocher said in his native French. "Management approves of the way I want to work and I like the challenge of refurbishing these vehicles."

(From the USAG Benelux's Meteor-Herault)